

Debs' Opening Campaign Speech to Workmen!

Opening address delivered by Eugene V. Debs, candidate for president of the Socialist party, Indianapolis, Ind., Sept. 1, 1904.

Mr. Chairman, Citizens and Comrades: There has never been a free people, a civilized nation, a real republic on this earth. Human society has always consisted of masters and slaves, and the slaves have always been and are today, the foundation stones of the social fabric.

Wage-labor is but a name; wage-slavery is the fact. The twenty-five millions of wage-workers in the United States are twenty-five millions of twentieth century slaves. This is the plain meaning of what is known as

The Labor Market.

And the labor market follows the capitalist flag. The most barbarous fact in all Christendom is the labor market. The mere term sufficiently expresses the animalism of commercial civilization.

They who buy and they who sell in the labor market are alike dehumanized by the inhuman traffic in the brains and blood and bones of human beings.

The labor market is the foundation of so-called civilized society. Without these shambles, without this commerce in human life, this sacrifice of manhood and womanhood, this barter of babes, this sale of souls, the capitalist civilizations of all lands and all climes would crumble to ruin and perish from the earth.

The Paramount Issue.

Twenty-five millions of wage-slaves are bought and sold daily at prevailing prices in the American labor market.

This is the paramount issue in the present national campaign.

Let me say at the very threshold of this discussion that the workers have but the one issue in this campaign, the overthrow of the capitalist system and the emancipation of the working class from wage-slavery.

The capitalists may have the tariff, finance, imperialism and other dust-covered and moth-eaten issues entirely to themselves.

The rattle of these relics no longer deceives workingmen whose heads are on their own shoulders.

They know by experience and observation that the gold standard, free silver, fiat money, protective tariff, free trade, imperialism and anti-imperialism all mean capitalist rule and wage-slavery.

Their eyes are open and they can see; their brains are in operation and they can think.

The very moment a workingman begins to do his own thinking he understands the paramount issue, parts company with the capitalist politician and falls in line with his own class on the political battlefield.

The political solidarity of the working class means the death of despotism, the birth of freedom, the sunrise of civilization.

Having said this much by way of introduction I will now enter upon the actualities of my theme.

The Class Struggle.

We are entering tonight upon a momentous campaign. The struggle for political supremacy is not between political parties merely, as appears upon the surface, but at bottom it is a life and death struggle between two hostile economic classes, the one the capitalist and the other the working class.

The capitalist class is represented by the republican, democratic, populist and prohibition parties, all of which stand for private ownership of the means of production and the triumph of any one of which will mean continued wage-slavery to the working class.

As the populist and prohibition sections of the capitalist party represent minority elements which propose to reform the capitalist system without disturbing wage-slavery, a vain and impossible task, they will be omitted from this discussion with all the credit due the rank and file for their good intentions.

The republican and democratic parties, or, to be more exact, the republican-democratic party, represents the capitalist class in the class struggle. They are the political wings of the capitalist system and such differences as arise between them relate to spoils and not to principles.

With either of these parties in power one thing is always certain



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and that is that the capitalist class are in the saddle, and the working class under the saddle.

Under the administration of both these parties the means of production are private property, production is carried forward for capitalist profit purely, markets are glutted and industry paralyzed, workingmen become tramps and criminals, while injunctions, soldiers and riot guns are brought into action to preserve "law and order" in the chaotic carnival of capitalistic anarchy.

Deny it as may the cunning capitalists who are clear-sighted enough to perceive it, or ignore it as may the torpid workers, who are too blind and unthinking to see it, the struggle in which we are engaged today is a class struggle, and as the toiling millions come

to see and understand it and rally to the political standard of their class, they will drive all capitalist parties of whatever name into the same party, and the class struggle will then be so clearly revealed that the hosts of labor will find their true place in the conflict and strike the united and decisive blow that will destroy slavery and achieve their full and final emancipation.

In this struggle the workingmen and women and children are represented by the Socialist party and it is my privilege to address you in the name of that revolutionary and uncompromising party of the working class.

Attitude of the Workers.

What shall be the attitude of the workers of the United States in the present campaign? What part shall they take in it? What party and what principles shall they support by their ballots? And why? These are questions the importance of which are not sufficiently recognized by workingmen or they would not be the prey of parasites and the servile tools of scheming politicians who use them only at election time to renew their master's lease of power and perpetuate their own ignorance, poverty and shame. In answering these questions I propose to be as frank and candid as plain-meaning words will allow, for I have but one object in this discussion and that object is not office, but the truth, and I shall state it as I see it if I have to stand alone. But I shall not stand alone, for the party that has my allegiance and may have my life, the Socialist party, the party of the working class, the party of emancipation, is made up of men and women who know their rights and scorn to compromise with their oppressors; who want no votes that can be bought and no support under any false pretense whatsoever.

The Socialist party stands squarely upon its proletarian principles and relies wholly upon the forces of industrial progress and the education of the working class.

The Socialist party buys no votes and promises no offices. Not a farthing is spent for whiskey or cigars. Every penny in the campaign fund is the voluntary offering of workers and their sympathizers and every penny is used for education. What other parties can say the same? Ignorance alone stands in the way of Socialist success. The capitalist parties understand this and use their resources to prevent the workers from seeing the light. Intellectual darkness is essential to industrial slavery. Capitalist parties stand for slavery and night. The Socialist party is the herald of freedom and light. Capitalist parties cunningly contrive to divide the workers upon dead issues. The Socialist party is uniting them upon the living issue: Death to wage slavery! When industrial slavery is as dead as the issues of the Siamese capitalist parties the Socialist party will have fulfilled its mission and enriched history.

And now to our questions: First, every workingman and woman owe it to themselves, their class and their country to take an active and intelligent interest in political affairs.

The Ballot.

The ballot of united labor expresses the people's will and the people's will is the supreme law of a free nation. The ballot means that labor is no longer dumb, that at last it has a voice, that it may be heard and if united must be heeded. Centuries of struggle and sacrifice were required to wrest this symbol of freedom from the mailed clutch of tyranny and place it in the hand of labor as the shield and lance of attack and defense. The abuse and not the use of it is responsible for its evils. The divided vote of labor is the abuse of the ballot and the penalty is slavery and death. The united vote of those who toil and have not will vanquish those who have and toil not and solve forever the problem of democracy.

The Historic Struggle of Classes.

Since the race was young there have been class struggles. In every state of society, ancient and modern, labor has been exploited, degraded and in subjection. Civilization has done little for labor except to modify the forms of its exploitation. Labor has always been the mudsill of the social fabric—is so now and will be until the class struggle ends in class extinction and free society.

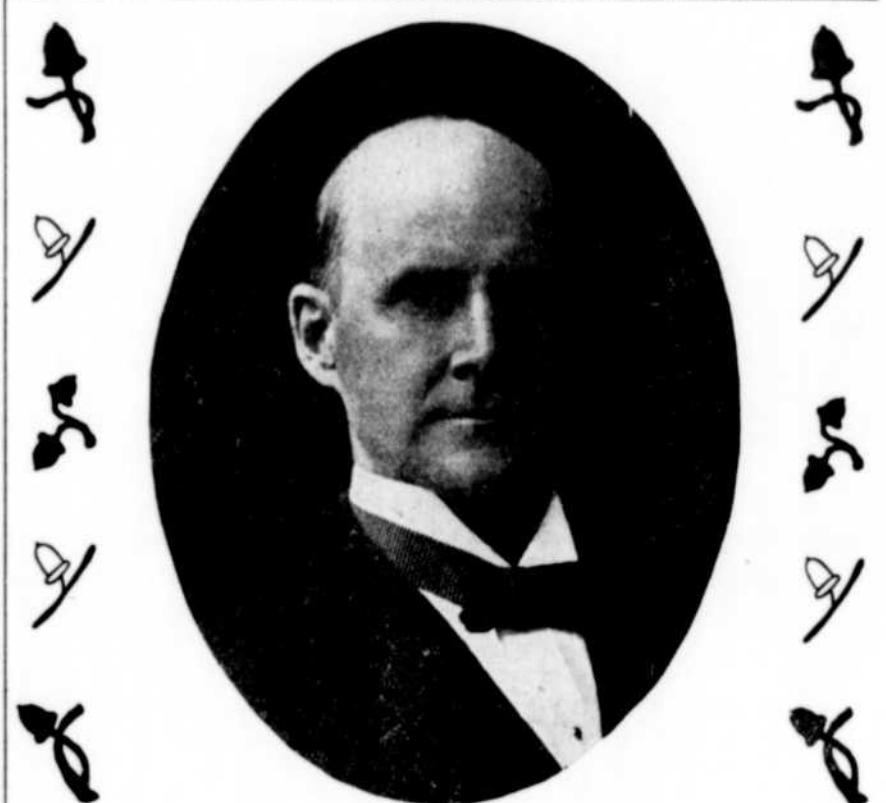
Society has always been and is now built upon exploitation—the exploitation of a class—the working class, whether slaves, serfs or wage-laborers, and the exploited working class in subjection have always been, instinctively or consciously, in revolt against their oppressors. Through all the centuries the enslaved toilers have moved slowly but surely toward their final freedom.

The call of the Socialist party is to the exploited class, the workers in all useful trades and professions, all honest occupations, from the most menial service to the highest skill, to rally beneath their own standard and put an end to the last of the barbarous class struggles by conquering the capitalist government, taking possession of the means of production and making them the common property of all, abolishing wage-slavery and establishing the co-operative commonwealth. The first step in this direction is to sever all relations with capitalist parties. They are precisely alike and I challenge their most discriminating partisans to tell them apart in relation to labor. The republican and democratic parties are alike capitalist parties—differing only in being committed to different sets of capitalist interests—they have the same principles under varying colors, are equally corrupt and are one in their subservience to capital and their hostility to labor. The ignorant workingman who supports either of these parties forges his own fetters and is the unconscious author of his own misery. He can and must be made to see and think and act with his fellows in supporting the party of his class and this work of education is the crowning virtue of the Socialist movement.

The Republican Party.

Let us briefly consider the republican party from the worker's standpoint. It is capitalist to the core. It has not and cannot have the slightest interest in labor except to exploit it. Why should a workingman support the republican party? Why should a millionaire support the Socialist party? For precisely the same reason that all the millionaires are opposed to the Socialist party, all the workers should be opposed to the republican party. It is a capitalist party, is loyal to capitalist interests and entitled to the support of capitalist voters on election day. All it has for workingmen is its "glorious past" and a "glad hand" when it wants their votes. The republican party is now and has been for several years in complete control of government. What has it done for labor? What has it not done for capital? Not one of the crying abuses of capital has been curbed under republican rule. Not one of the petitions of labor has been granted. The eight-hour and anti-injunction bills, upon which organized labor is a unit, were again ruthlessly slain by the last congress in obedience to the capitalist masters. David M. Parry has greater influence at Washington than all the millions of organized

workers. Read the national platform of the Republican party and see if there is in all its bombast a crumb of comfort for labor. The convention that adopted it was a capitalist convention and the only thought it had of labor was how to abstract its vote without waking it up. In the only reference it made to labor it had to speak easy so as to avoid offense to the capitalists who own it and furnish the bootle to keep it in power. The labor platforms of the republican and democratic parties are interchangeable and non-redeemable. They both favor "justice to capital and justice to labor." This hoary old platitude is worse than meaningless. It is false and misleading and so intended. Justice to labor means that labor shall have what it



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produces. This leaves nothing for capital. Justice to labor means the end of capital. The old parties intend nothing of the kind. It is false pretense and false promise. It has served well in the past. Will it continue to catch the votes of unthinking and deluded workers? What workingman had part in the republican national convention or were honored by it? The grand coliseum swarmed with trust magnates, corporation barons, money lords, stock gamblers, professional politicians, lawyers, lobbyists and other plutocratic tools and mercenaries, but there was no room for the horny-handed and horny-headed sons of toil. They built it, but were not in it.

Compare that convention with the convention of the Socialist party, composed almost wholly of workingmen and women and controlled wholly in the interest of their class. But a party is still better known by its chosen representatives than by its platform declarations. Who are the nominees of the republican party for the highest offices in the gift of the nation and what is their relation to the working class? First of all, Theodore Roosevelt and Charles W. Fairbanks, candidates for president and vice president, respectively, deny the class struggle and this almost infallibly fixes their status as friends of capital and enemies of labor. They insist that they can serve both; but the fact is obvious that only one can be served and that one at the expense of the other. Mr. Roosevelt's whole political career proves it. The capitalists made no mistake in nominating Mr. Roosevelt. They know him well and he has served them well. They know that his instincts, associations, tastes and desires are with them, that he is in fact one of them and that he has nothing in common with the working class. The only evidence to the contrary is his membership in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, which seems to have come to him co-incidental with his ambition to succeed himself in the presidential chair. He is a full-fledged member of the union, has the grip, signs and passwords, but it is not reported that he is attending meetings, doing picket duty, supporting strikes and boycotts and performing such other duties as his union obligation imposes.

When ex-President Grover Cleveland violated the constitution and outraged justice by seizing the state of Illinois by the throat and handcuffing her civil administration at the behest of the crime-stained trusts and corporations, Theodore Roosevelt was among his most ardent admirers and enthusiastic supporters. He wrote in hearty commendation of the atrocious act, pronounced it most exalted patriotism and said he would have done the same thing himself had he been president. And so he would and so he will! How impressive to see the rough rider embrace the smooth statesman! Oyster Bay and Buzzards' Bay! "Two souls with but a single thought, two hearts that beat as one."

There is also the highest authority for the statement charging Mr. Roosevelt with declaring about the same time he was lauding Cleveland that if he was in command he would have such as Altgeld, Debs and other traitors lined up against a dead wall and shot into corpses. The brutal remark was not for publication but found its way into print and Mr. Roosevelt, after he became a candidate, attempted to make denial, but the distinguished editor who heard him say it pinned him fast, and the slight doubt that remained was dispelled by the words themselves, which sound like Roosevelt and bear the impress of his war-like visage.

Following the Pullman strike in 1894 there was an indignant and emphatic popular protest against "government by injunction," which has not yet by any means subsided. Organized labor was, and is, a unit against this insidious form of judicial usurpation as a means of abrogating constitutional restraints of despotic power.

Mr. Roosevelt, with his usual zeal to serve the ruling class and keep their protesting slaves in subjection, vaulted into the arena and launched his vitriolic tirade upon the mob that dared oppose the divine decree of a corporation judge.

"Men who object to what they style 'government by injunction,'" said he, "are, as regards the essential principles of government, in hearty sympathy with their remote skin-clad ancestors, who lived in caves, fought one another with stone-headed axes and ate the mammoth and woolly rhinoceros. They are dangerous whenever there